DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 224 221 EC 150 604

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TITLE Special Education Referrals: Failure to Replicate Student-Teacher Ethnicity Interaction.
PUB DATE Aug 82
NOTE 10p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Psychological Association (Washington, DC, August 23-27, 1982).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Blacks; *Disabilities; *Ethnic Groups; Hispanic Americans; Racial Differences; *Referral; *Sex Differences; Student Placement; *Teacher Attitudes; *Teacher Characteristics

ABSTRACT

To investigate the influence of student sex, ethnicity and teacher sex, ethnicity, and teaching level on referrals to special education, 320 teachers responded to a case history by completing 11 Likert-type questions. Results showed that recommendations were influenced by teacher ethnicity and teaching level, but not by student sex or race. Also, teacher ethnicity and student sex showed significant interaction. Black and white teachers recommended more males, while Hispanics more females for special education. Findings failed to replicate earlier results showing interaction between teacher and student race with teachers recommending fewer students of their own background for special education. (Author/CL)

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Special Education Referrals: Failure to Replicate Student-Teacher Ethnicity Interaction

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One of the areas of most intense educational activity in recent years has been the referral of children to special educational services for treatment of various school related difficulties. This activity has created some interest in the factors leading educators to recommend the referral of students for such services. The purpose of this study was to extend prior research clarifying the variables which might influence teachers in recommending students for specialized educational services.

In previous research Tobias, Cole, Zibrin, and Bodlakova (1982) administered a case history of a sixteen year old male student who had a variety of school difficulties. The ethnic background of the youngster was varied in four ways, that is, he was described as being either black, Hispanic, white, or no enthic background was specified. These different versions were randomly administered to a total of 199 teachers, also of varying background. Based on this case history teachers were asked to make recommendations regarding whether the youngster should be referred for special educational services, or could be maintained in a regular classroom.

An interaction was found in the Tobias et al (1982) study between teacher and student ethnicity. Teachers' recommendations indicated that they were more likely to refer students from ethnic groups other

EC150604

Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the
American Psychological Association
Washington, DC
August 23-27, 1982

than their own for special education services, than members of their own ethnic groups. For example, black teachers had significantly higher scores on questions of need for referral to special educational services, when responding to the case history in which the youngster was described as being Hispanic, white, or no ethnic background was supplied, than they did when the youngster was described as being black. Similar tendencies were revealed for Hispanic and white teachers. There was no significant main effect for student ethnic background. That is, there were no differences in the judgments of teachers when the youngster were described as being either black, Hispanic, white or no ethnic background was supplied. Finally, significant differences in recommendation among teachers were found indicating that Hispanic teachers had the lowest mean of the dependent variable (tendency to recommend to special education), followed by black and white teachers.

The results of the Tobias et al. (1982) investigation suggested that the similarity of teacher-student ethnicity had been an important variable in judgments regarding the need for special educational services. There were a number of questions raised by that investigation which were expected to be clarified in the present study. In the prior research the case described the student as being 16 years old. Since most of the referrals for special educational services occur in elementary school, teachers rarely have the occasion to refer secondary school youngsters for such services. Since it was unknown to what degree the student's age affected the results, the present study described the student as 10 years old and attending fifth grade, a group in which youngsters are more frequently referred for such

services. Furthermore, in the prior study a large percentage (83.4) of the teacher sample were secondary school or adult teachers. Since such teachers may not have much experience in referring students, teaching level of the respondents was included as a variable in the present design. Since all versions of the case history described the students as being male, the sex of the youngster was varied in the present study in order to determine whether the students' sex contributed significant variance to the dependent variable.

Procedure

The case history used in this investigation as adapted from that used in prior research (Tobias et al, 1982). A ten year old student attending fifth grade was described as achieving two years below grade level, and having a variety of behavorial difficulties. The identical case history was developed in eight different versions. Half of the histories described the student as male, the other half as female. In each of these gender categories, the student was described as being either black, Hispanic, or white and in a fourth version no ethnic background was given. Answers to the case history were anonymous; respondents were, however, asked to check off their ethnic background, teaching level, years of experience and gender.

Teachers responded to the case history by completing eleven Likert type questions. The questions asked the teacher to judge whether the student could be maintained in a regular classroom, required specialized educational services, psychological testing or psychiatric evaluation, and requested judgments regarding the severity of the problem described.

Different versions of the case history were randomly assigned to teachers. That is, booklets containing the materials were assembled in such a way that all eight versions (two sex, and four ethnic backgrounds) were stacked one after the other. When the forms were handed out any teacher, then, had an equal probability of receiving one of the eight versions of this case history.

Subjects

The subjects were 362 students enrolled during the summer session in various graduate level Education courses at six different branches of an urban university. Only those students who had actual teaching experience in elementary or secondary schools, or in Special Education classes were included in the sample. The final group used for the analysis consisted of 320 individuals for whom complete data were available.

Results and Discussion

The reliability of the questionnaire was computed using the SPSS Reliability program. Two items which tended to lower the reliability were deleted leaving a scale of nine items (α = .77) which was used in the analysis. The two items that had been used in the previous study, namely, "The child should be recommended for special education" and "The child is best kept in a regular classroom" had a reability coefficient of α =.59 this time, while on the previous occasion it had been 0.68.

A *t*-test comparing the reactions of male and female teachers showed no significant differences so these data were pooled.

Insert Table I about here

A 4 (Student's ethnicity) X 2 (Student's sex) X 3 (Teacher's ethnic background) X 3 (Teaching level) ANOVA was performed using 320 subjects for whom all data were complete. Significant main effects were found only for ethnic background of teacher ($F(2,288) = 4.00$, $p < .05$) and for teaching level ($F(2,288) = 11.01$, $p < .001$.) The only significant interaction was between the ethnicity of the teacher and the sex of the student ($F(2,288) = 4.06$, $p < .05$).

An examination of the means (Table 1) for the different cells shows that white teachers had a higher tendency to recommend Special Education than Hispanic or black teachers. Also, Special Education teachers recommended referral to Special Education most frequently and secondary teachers least often. The interaction effects showed that black and white teachers had a greater tendency to recommend male students for Special Educatior while Hispanic teachers recommended females more frequently.

Insert Table 2 about here

The results of this study did not replicate prior findings of an interaction between student and teacher ethnicity. The nine item scale forming the dependent variable consisted of two of the items used as dependent variables of the preceeding study. Analysis of the data using these two items revealed main effects for teaching level ($F=14.21$, $p < .001$). The means (Table 2) indicated that secondary school teachers made the fewest recommendations for referral, whereas elementary school and special education teachers tended to make more such referrals. No other effects of this analysis were significant.

When these same two items were analyzed in exactly the same way as in the prior study, that is, when teaching level and student sex were eliminated as variables, none of the main effects or interactions were significant. This part of the analysis, then, failed to replicate earlier findings.

In the preceeding study a large percentage of the respondents were secondary school teachers. One of the questions raised in the analysis of those data were the effects of using samples consisting predominately of secondary school teachers since that group has little experience with referrals for Special Education. The present study indicates that secondary school teachers do make fewer referrals for Specialized Educational services. Apparently the interaction between student and teacher ethnicity observed in the prior investigation may be attributed to the presence of a large number of secondary school teachers in that sample.

Several findings of the prior investigation were replicated in this study. Thus, there were no differences in recommendations for referral attributable to the students ethnicity. This finding confirmed the prior investigation and other studies that when referral for Special Education was varied experimentally little evidence of disproportion referrals of minority youngsters was evident. The frequently observed finding that minority youngsters are actually referred for Specialized Educational services more frequently in real life situations may, then, well be a function of variables other than those investigated in this and preceeding studies.

Footnote

1) Paper presented at the annual convention of the American Psychological Association Washington, D.C., August 1982. Preparation of this paper was supported by the Institute for Research and Development in Occupational Education, Center for the Advanced Study of Education, City University of New York.

TABLE 1

Means on Nine Item Referral Recommendation Scale

and Number of Subjects for All Groups

Teacher's Ethnic Background	Student's Sex		Teaching Level			Student's Ethnic Background				
	Female	Male	Elem.	Sec.	Sp.Ed.	Black	His.	White	None	Total
Black	23.4 (27)	24.7 (29)	23.9 (32)	23.3 (9)	25.7 (15)	24.3 (16)	23.7 (13)	24.6 (13)	23.9 (14)	24.1 (56)
Hispanic	25.9 (27)	23.3 (27)	24.0 (38)	24.4 (5)	26.9 (11)	24.8 (16)	24.5 (10)	23.8 (13)	25.2 (15)	24.6 (54)
White	25.4 (102)	26.0 (108)	25.6 (115)	23.5 (37)	27.3 (58)	25.4 (50)	25.6 (55)	26.0 (57)	25.8 (48)	25.7 (210)
TOTAL	25.1 (156)	25.4 (164)	25.0 (185)	23.6 (51)	26.9 (84)	25.1 (82)	25.1 (78)	25.4 (83)	25.3 (77)	25.2 (320)

TABLE 2

Means on Two Item Recommendation Referral Scale,[1] and Number of Cases for All Groups.

Teacher's Ethnic Background	Teaching Level			Student's Ethnic Background				
	Elem.	Sec.	Sp.Ed.	Black	Hisp.	White	None	Total
Black	5.4 (32)	4.8 (9)	5.6 (15)	5.1 (16)	5.3 (13)	5.3 (13)	5.7 (14)	5.4 (56)
Hispanic	5.6 (38)	5.0 (5)	6.6 (11)	5.5 (16)	5.5 (10)	5.8 (13)	6.1 (15)	5.7 (54)
White	5.6 (115)	5.0 (37)	6.4 (58)	5.6 (50)	5.8 (55)	5.8 (57)	5.6 (48)	5.7 (210)
Total	5.6 (185)	5.0 (51)	6.3 (84)	5.5 (82)	5.7 (78)	5.7 (83)	5.7 (77)	5.7 (320)